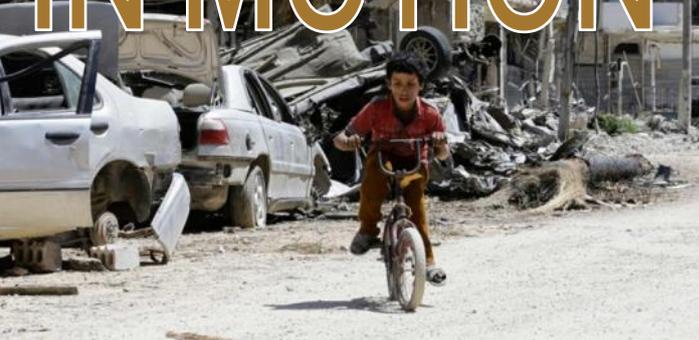


# A WORLD IN MOTION



ISSUE 193 | 26 APRIL 2018

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As the Syrian army advanced on the remaining 'rebel' stronghold in Damascus, the evidence of the Douma 'chemical attack' is questioned.

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The much-anticipated summit between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump has raised questions about the likelihood of North Korea's denuclearisation.

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The rapid growth of social media influence in world affairs brings huge challenges and opportunities.

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PROJECT HERO is helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria through aid distribution.



## THE NUMBERS: SYRIAN WAR - 2018



14.04.2018

The date the Syrian army declared Eastern Ghouta liberated



2

The remaining number of rebel-held strongholds: Idlib and Deraa



2,000,000+

The estimated number of people in Idlib (half are internally displaced)



23%

The percentage of UN funding that has been raised for Syria for 2018 (\$795m of the \$3.5bn needed)

## EVIDENCE OF 'CHEMICAL ATTACK' QUESTIONED



By Donnelly McClelland

Rebel fighters in the last area outside Syrian government control near Damascus agreed on Friday [20 April] to withdraw but the army's bombardment continued pending a full surrender deal, state media and a war monitor reported. The development heralds another advance for President Bashar al-Assad's push to retake remaining enclaves and strengthen his position around the capital after retaking eastern Ghouta this month. Assad is in his strongest position since early in the seven-year war despite US, British and French air strikes on 14 April – their first coordinated action in the war. (*Reuters*)

### Revelations from Douma, Eastern Ghouta

The so-called 'rebel fighters' on which the Syrian army have focused their attention, south of Damascus, are part of the Islamic State (IS) group, and like so many of the 'moderate rebels' they have subjected those under their authority to years of domination, often prohibiting residents from leaving besieged areas. As with the stories told after the liberation of Eastern Aleppo, various accounts are emerging from newly-liberated Douma in Eastern Ghouta. Residents have recounted their lives over the past years under armed rebel groups such as Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam): deprivation, restricted movements, forced labour, exorbitant prices, people being used as human shields, and the hoarding of provisions by militants and some residents. Syrian and Russian armed forces have also uncovered military caches under hospitals, and chemical laboratories. A mass burial site of approximately 100 bodies was also discovered this past week.

In 2015, Jaish al-Islam paraded their captives (soldiers from the Syrian army, and women and children from the minority Alawite group) in iron cages on the back of flatbed trucks, threatening to place them in positions across Douma in an effort to deter the Syrian army from bombing their positions. And, when they were almost defeated in early April this year, a 'chemical attack' was reported from within their area, with social media footage going viral. The international community was quick to accuse the Syrian army of perpetrating the "heinous act" (with Russia accused of being complicit), and before any aspect of the story could be properly verified, the US, France and Britain dispatched missiles against targets said to be chemical weapon manufacturing sites (without a declaration of war against Syria, or consent of their parliaments or congress).

### Possible staging of 'chemical attack'

Russian and Syrian officials vehemently denied the use of chemical weapons and went so far as to claim that the whole 'chemical attack' was staged. After Jaish al-Islam surrendered and agreed to be relocated, and outside officials could begin to attempt an investigation, many media outlets screamed "cover-up" before any objective investigation could take place, thereby maintaining control over the dominant narrative concerning Syria. However, this has not deterred some determined investigations on the part of independent journalists (including some from the US and Britain) who are not convinced by flawed arguments of governments and mainstream media houses.

Pearson Sharp, of *One America News*, entered Syria a week after the alleged attack and was in Damascus when Western forces fired missiles at 'chemical weapon' sites. His footage of Damascus does not show a people cowed by a 'butchering' leader, but a resilient people determined to live as normal a life as possible under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. He spoke openly with people who did not hate him simply for being American, though they could not understand why the US was "waging war against them". He then entered Douma, unhindered and without any Syrian or Russian army escort, and proceeded to question people randomly on the street about their experiences on the day of the 'chemical attack'. No one had seen

# NEWS HEADLINES



**Zimbabwe** will invite Western powers to monitor its national elections for the first time in more than 15 years, official papers showed, ending a ban imposed by veteran former leader Robert Mugabe. The vote, scheduled for July, is seen as a major test for President Emmerson Mnangagwa's democratic credentials since he came to power in November after a de facto army coup ousted 94-year-old Mugabe.



The head of **Russia's** military general staff and **NATO's** supreme allied commander held a rare face-to-face meeting to try to ease the worst East-West tensions since the Cold War. The meeting comes less than a week after the US, Britain and France staged missile strikes on Syria in retaliation for a suspected chemical weapons attack by the forces of President Bashar al-Assad - a close ally of Russia.



**Saudi Arabia's** King Salman met French cardinal Jean-Louis Taurin in Riyadh on Wednesday during the first visit to the kingdom by such a senior Catholic authority, Saudi state news agency SPA reported. It followed a flurry of meetings between senior Saudi figures and representatives of other Christian traditions in recent months, raising hopes of more openness in the kingdom which hosts Islam's holiest sites but bans the practice of other faiths.

or heard it, and no one had smelled any evidence of chemical weapons. One man Sharp spoke to was only 50 meters away from where the attack reportedly took place, and he said that nothing happened.

Sharp went on to find the hospital that was featured in the video footage and questioned staff he encountered there. The witnesses stated that it had been a very normal day – bombardment of the area from Syrian and Russian forces had happened in a similar way, but due to a windstorm, there were more cases of breathing difficulties than normal (from the dust trapped in the basements and tunnels where people sheltered from the bombings). Suddenly, a group of people had rushed in, shouting “chemicals, chemicals” and grabbing hoses to wash people down. Panic had ensued and others had copied them, but the doctors who were present at the time said that there were no fatalities that day, and no signs of chemical agents.

Veteran journalist Robert Fisk, reporting for *The Independent*, called the ‘attack’ into question and quoted Dr Assim Rahaibani at the hospital (who wasn't there that night but knows those who were): “The patients were overcome not by gas but by oxygen starvation in the rubbish-filled tunnels and basements in which they lived, on a night of wind and heavy shelling that stirred up a dust storm.” During the interview, the doctor twice referred to the jihadi gunmen of Jaish el-Islam in Douma as “terrorists” – the Syrian government's word for their enemies, and a term used by many people across Syria.

## TERMS OF NORTH KOREA'S DENUCLEARISATION



By **Andrew Richards**

**A**s a planned summit between Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un approaches, Pyongyang has indicated it would abandon its nuclear programme without requiring American troops to leave the Korean Peninsula. “The North is expressing a will for a complete denuclearisation”, South Korean president Moon Jae-in said to reporters. “They have not attached any conditions that the US cannot accept, such as the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. All they are talking about is the end of hostile policies against North Korea, followed by a guarantee of security”. (*The Independent*)

### Let's negotiate

The prestige associated with the visit of a United States president is a goal that three generations of the Kim dynasty have failed to achieve until now. Although President Donald Trump is not the first to receive an invitation to meet with a North Korean

### FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

It is deeply concerning that Western governments (often referred to as the “Christian West” due to its legacy of Biblically-influenced governments and constitutions) have, on numerous occasions, pursued war and the violent over-throw of foreign leaders as the first option, rather than the last resort (think of Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and now Syria). It does not seem to help that their decisions have been proven to be ill-advised, or that the results of their decisions have caused irreparable harm to hundreds of thousands of people – they continue to beat the war drums. And because democratic Western governments are supposedly governed “by the people, for the people”, it stands to reason that people in the ‘Christian West’ have authorised such actions, simply by a lack of resistance to the shedding of blood under the guise of a “humanitarian response”. Perhaps it is time for those in the free ‘Christian West’ to question and demand well-reasoned responses (and proper evidence) from their elected governments and their media houses.

**PRAY > For the Syrian government and Russian leaders, that they will work towards restoring peace to Syria > For the truth to be revealed concerning the many foreign vested interests in Syria > For Syrian believers to hold on to their hope in Christ and to be shining lights in their communities**

leader, he is the first to accept. Two former US presidents, Carter and Clinton, travelled to North Korea on humanitarian missions to secure the release of US prisoners, but Mr Trump will be the first to sit down with a North Korean leader.

Analysts have warned that the North Korean leadership could use the planned visit as a propaganda tool that could portray the US as the ‘weaker party’, with North Korea having the power to make the world's most powerful nation come to them. North Korea could be portrayed as a nuclear state able to threaten world leaders (not just a ‘backward hermit kingdom’), but it is unlikely that the US would tolerate this.

The head of the CIA, Mike Pompeo, secretly travelled to North Korea over the Easter weekend to meet with Kim Jong-un, reportedly to prepare the way for a future visit by Mr Trump who is determined to make a deal that would end the conflict between North and South Korea and the nuclear threat that North Korea poses to the US. According to the State Department, Mr Trump's visit could be as early as June. But is such a deal even possible?

In all the previous negotiations between North Korea and the US (or any other country) concerning the former's denuclearisation, the North Korean leadership has never conceded to American troops remaining in the South. North Korea has understandable fears that if they were to give up their nuclear weapons – their only viable threat – little would remain to stop US troops moving into the North from the South and ultimately deposing Mr Kim.

# NEWS HEADLINES



An Islamic State suicide bomber killed at least 57 people including women and children and wounded 119 outside a voter registration centre in the **Afghan** capital Kabul on 22 April, in the latest attack on election preparations. The assaults underscore growing concerns about security in the lead-up to legislative elections scheduled for 20 October, seen as a test-run for next year's presidential poll.



**Sudan's** President Omar al-Bashir has ordered the release of all political prisoners held in the country, state news agency SUNA said. The decision came in response to calls from political parties and groups that have participated in the country's ongoing national dialogue to grant detainees the opportunity to engage in the political process, and as part of "steps to prepare a permanent constitution for the country."



**Russia** could supply Syria with advanced S-300 missile systems in the near future, Russian military sources have told the Kommersant newspaper, warning Israel would "suffer catastrophic consequences" if it attacked the system. The daily newspaper said experts believed Israel would react negatively to any decision to supply the missiles to Syria, and might bomb the area where they would be deployed.

It therefore comes as a surprise that the North Korean leader would concede to the demands of the West, especially after Mr Trump threatened destruction if North Korea continued its nuclear and missile programmes. Analysts are asking what could have brought about such a sharp change of direction, and whether there is any real hope of a new and free North (or even a unified Korea) in the future.

## **Future possibilities**

Much of the world's perceptions of North Korea are negative, based on the limited information available. The nation's "hermit" status, lack of personal freedoms and limits on travel for their people make it incredibly difficult to develop an accurate assessment of the nation. For millions in the world, North Korea is an enigma, and for decades, the ruling body has used that mystery to build fear – a defence mechanism of sorts, against what they view as a "hostile" world.

But, if these negotiations lead to denuclearisation and a greater openness, the possibilities for the people of North Korea (and the greater peninsula) become endless. The manner in which these negotiations are conducted and the way the North opens up will greatly influence the success thereof, and will dictate whether re-unification might become a reality.

## **FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

According to Dr Hyun Sook Foley, Voice of the Martyrs' Korean president, Christians represented the largest voluntary social group in unified Korea before the Korean War. There were more than 2,000 churches in the country in 1942 – mostly

Presbyterian, and mostly in the north. Before the war, Pyongyang (the North Korean capital) was widely known as the 'Jerusalem of the East' due to the large number of Christians in the city. But after the 1945 partitioning of the country, the North Korean government attacked the Church through its financial base: in 1946, it confiscated Christians' finances through the Land Reform Act, and in 1948, nationalised key industries that further weakened churches.

There are many theories why the once-strong Church in North Korea failed to survive Japanese occupation, and later, the cult of the Kim dynasty. Some suggest that the affluence of the Church brought about its downfall, as prominent leaders quickly changed sides in order to keep their riches. However, as with the Church in China, persecution prompted growth within the Church – firstly in maturity, and later in number.

Today, an estimated 40,000 Christians are in forced labour camps and the Church has literally been forced underground. If freedom does come to North Korea, albeit little by little, the growth of Christianity would probably match the growth of that of the Chinese Church when restrictions were loosened after the revolution. Could a visit by Mr Trump be a catalyst in the process of North Korea finding freedom?

**PRAY > For an honest negotiation process between the parties involved > For a lasting breakthrough for the Korean peninsula > For believers in North Korea to be encouraged and strengthened > For believers in South Korea to take the lead in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation**

# THE FAR-REACHING IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA



*By Andrew Richards*

**T**he psychologist behind an app that harvested data from 50 million Facebook users defended his role in the data scandal, saying he "never heard a word" of opposition from the social media giant. Facebook says Aleksandr Kogan's app, This Is Your Digital Life, was downloaded by 270,000 people and also gave Kogan access to their friends. The data was passed to British communications firm Cambridge Analytica and was used to help elect US President Donald Trump. But the company has blamed Kogan for misusing it, while he claims they and Facebook have used him as a scapegoat. The University of Cambridge lecturer told CBS's 60 Minutes he was "sincerely sorry" for the data mining, but insisted there was a widespread belief that users knew their data was being sold and shared. (AFP)

## **Making data work**

The recent Facebook data scandal has caused millions to ask if their personal information on the internet is safe, and if not, in what way it can be used. According to official statements by Cambridge Analytica, the harvested Facebook user information was directly used to sway public opinion towards Donald Trump during his election campaign, and eventually led to his election as president of the United States. Aside from the illegal use of private social media profiles, Russia is accused of 'hacking' Donald Trump to victory.

A recent Pew Research study showed that one out of five people change their view on a particular subject because of a post on a friend's timeline. Darrel West, Vice President and Director at the Brookings Institute, says: "Social media is the ultimate in disruptive technology. They change information delivery, business organisation, online content, news coverage, and the manner in which individuals process new developments. Using social networking outreach tools such as Facebook and Twitter, a number of Democratic and Republican candidates raised money, identified supporters, built electoral coalitions, and brought people in closer touch with the electoral process."

So here's a serious question: Are we, the users of social media, so gullible that our opinions can be changed without us knowing they have been

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changed? A look at the history of social media could provide the answer.

### *History of (and current trends in) social media*

The history of social media goes further back than one might think – as far back as the first letter sent between two people (the first postal service dates back to 550 BC). Sharing information drives relationships, and the need to get information quicker has fuelled the development of social media through the centuries. The late 1700s gave us the telegraph, and the radio and telephone fed the hunger for news in the late 1800s. Social media via the invention of the internet arrived in 1997 when the first recognised social media website – where you could upload a profile of yourself, for the purpose of connecting with others – was created by Six Degrees. Blogs emerged in 1999, but it was when MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook were introduced to the world that the power of social media reached new heights.

Social media connects the world by helping people 'cross oceans' when talking to a friend in another country. It helps someone buy the right car after reading comments from friends on the best model and price. Social media helps people meet new friends and connect with old friends. It helps to plan events, and most importantly (as it was back in 550 BC), social media provides news (albeit largely 'feel good' or sensationalist news).

Social media is a 'freeway' for hoaxers to spread fake news, and millions of people – from all races, languages and countries – are fooled into believing what is factually incorrect. Even within Christian circles, fake news abounds: from calls for prayer for missionaries being targeted in a fictional city somewhere in India ('Olisabang'), to messages bringing division between denominations by spreading false information. The problem is that even when hoaxes are exposed and fraudsters identified, believers still fall for fake news. Social media has a big role to play therein, because it allows connected groups of people to somehow validate fake news as being real. If a friend on Facebook says it's real, because his friend on Twitter said it was, then 'news' stories (such as the one about the Pope rewriting the Bible) are accepted as being true.

### *FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE*

Christian author and guest columnist for John Piper's Desiring God network, Kim Cash Tate, asks whether Christian behaviour on social media reflects the kind of fruit that Christians should display in a world wanting the opposite. In an article featured on Desiring God, Tate says: "Social media is robust with real-time engagement. Timelines are filled with reaction and raw emotion. Opinions are wielded like swords. Political and popular figures are skewered with aplomb. It's easy to step into this fast-moving current and get carried by the flesh."

Tate suggests that carnal desires are responsible for 'un-Christlike' behaviour on social media: "Social media enlivens our carnal nature. We enjoy quick satisfaction. Emotion wants an outlet. Complaints must be heard. Anger needs to be expressed. And contrary views must be vigorously opposed, because that's what the flesh enjoys as well – superiority. It will mow down another's views – succinctly if on Twitter – while elevating its own, earning a satisfying flurry of shares and retweets. We all know how much the flesh loves validation."

Tate concludes that it's only when Christians walk by the Spirit that social media can be used for good. "Walking by the flesh may be an accepted norm on social media, but it's not possible to please God in the flesh (Romans 8:8). As believers, we're called to die to those carnal impulses and walk by the Spirit, perhaps especially on social media, given its reach and impact. We should ask ourselves if our posts are gracious and edifying. Am I slow to speak? Are love and kindness reflected? Am I blessing or cursing those I deem enemies? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about me and my need to be right? Is the Lord being glorified? It's a daily battle, flesh against Spirit. 'For these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do' (Galatians 5:17). This battle is amplified on social media, and yet, social media is where we can also shine brightly for Christ."

**PRAY > For greater discernment with regard to news distributed via social media > For believers to be Christ-like in their interactions on social media > For believers to be wise in their use of social media**

## KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION

### *PROJECT HERO*

*Helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria*

Project Hero focuses on those who choose to remain in Syria, who deal with the daily bombings (which have again intensified in districts of Damascus) from which others have fled, and who encounter death as part of daily life. Those who have stayed have done so for two reasons: either they have been unable to get out (for reasons such as old age or a lack of finances), or they have refused to leave Syria because it is home and they still believe they have a role to play in the reconstruction of the nation.



**"You stand beside us with your big support, we thank you for all your giving for the church and its people." - Pastor in Damascus**

To support this project, please make use of the INcontext bank details and use HERO together with your email address (as much of it as possible) as reference.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact our project department ([gustav@incontextministries.org](mailto:gustav@incontextministries.org)) or [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the website